

PLANNING TO MAKE DREAMS REALITY



Fern Tiger Associates | 201 Clay Street, Suite 290 | Oakland, California 94607 | 510.208.7700

## ARIZONA QUEST FOR KIDS

The educational level of a population is a measure of both economic health and individual well-being. In the greater Phoenix, AZ, area, the low overall educational attainment of its residents has long been a concern for local and state leaders. Finding solutions to this issue has been made more difficult with the downward turn of the economy, which had hit Arizona extremely hard during the late 2000s. Phoenix's more vulnerable populations saw drastic cuts to services, with some programs being eliminated altogether. In times like this, families often feel they have no choice but to have more family members enter the workforce early, thereby sacrificing dreams of higher education for their children. This situation poses obstacles to Phoenix's efforts to lower the area's high school dropout rate and increase college-going rates.

Directly addressing these efforts to increase the rates of high school graduation and college attendance, Arizona Quest for Kids (Quest) was founded by a banker who had heard about a successful program in Florida. Launched in 2000, the program was initially conceived as a mentoring and scholarship program at one middle school, but grew quickly to include several schools situated in diverse areas throughout Greater Phoenix.

**PROJECT DATE:**  
2008-2009

**SECTOR:** *Youth  
Development, Education*

**KEY SKILLS AND SERVICES:**  
*Organizational assessment,  
strategic planning,  
facilitation*

*Since completion of its strategic planning process, ARIZONA QUEST FOR KIDS has become Quest Scholars, a program of New Pathways for Youth. This mentoring program supports low-income, high achieving students through high school graduation and their college application process.*

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Following numerous changes in organizational leadership, in 2008 Quest began considering ways to provide depth of focus to its programming while better communicating its programs and successes. So in Spring of that year, Quest approached Fern Tiger Associates to help plan for the future and consider issues related to growth, stability, and “right-sizing” of the program. This was in anticipation of the increasing need for educational advancement among children from low-income families, many of whom were first generation high school graduates and English language learners (and/or from monolingual Spanish-speaking households).

As a young and eager organization, Quest had struggled to become stable after significant staff and administrative changes during its first six years. The organization had been led by four different executive directors – each with different perspectives of the potential role of the organization and different views on expansion, staffing, program, and goals. It was hoped that a strategic planning process led by FTA would help Quest transform from an unsustainable “scholarship provider” to a “professional support” organization that provided expert knowledge and access to diverse financial aid offerings.

*Just seven years after its founding, Arizona Quest for Kids found itself in need of programming focus and simultaneously faced an increasingly difficult funding environment. These challenges prompted Quest to approach FTA to conduct an intensive strategic planning process that would engage internal and external stakeholders, illuminate and analyze key policy issues, and define and articulate goals and strategies.*

*2010 data reveal that 18.5% of Phoenix adults did not complete high school; and only 18% completed four-year college programs.*

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The five-year Strategic Plan – “A Plan to Make Dreams Reality” – was developed by FTA in conjunction with the Board of Directors and managers of Quest. In preparing the plan, FTA held a full-day Board/manager retreat and several focused follow-up sessions with the Board. In preparation for each of these sessions, FTA provided extensive organizational and demographic background information and assessments – including a situational assessment – to guide the Board in clarifying Quest’s mission and direction for its future. In addition, FTA drafted a set of “thought papers” to support discussion on particularly tough issues related to the organization’s future.

The final Strategic Plan included a broad program focus, developed to ensure stability, program integration, and appropriate growth – supported by six targeted strategies focusing on children, families, mentors, schools, community, and policies that impact education. Together, these goals and strategies provided directional focus for the organization as a whole, and formed the basis for programming. Management goals were also developed to support internal operations (governance, staff development, fiscal management, communication, evaluation, and facilities and technology).

*As part of Quest’s parent education project (designed to encourage monolingual, Spanish-speaking parents to become active in their children’s schools and aware of the benefits of higher education), the organization contracted with the ASU’s American Dream Academy to present a series of “telenovela-style” films that dramatically portrayed the importance of education. The films were professionally acted, targeted for the Quest audience, and parents could identify with the characters.*